Serve God Where He's Put You
1 Corinthians 7:17-24

We're looking at 1 Corinthians, and we're in a part of the letter where Paul is talking about marriage and singleness. And at first glance the passage we're looking at today seems to be Paul going off on a tangent. He's just been talking about Christians not divorcing their non-Christian husband or wife, even when marriage is hard, and in the next passage, he picks up that same subject of marriage and singleness. But in this passage, he seems to make an abrupt left turn and starts talking about your calling, and circumcision and slavery. And you can think, what has this got to do with what's gone before or comes next? And what's circumcision and slavery got to do with me?

Well, this passage has everything to do with the hard things of marriage and singleness. In fact, it has everything to do with any and every situation you find yourself in, especially the hard. And so it has a huge amount to say to us. Maybe particularly at a moment like now.

You see, our consumerist and individualistic culture engrains in us the idea that if I could just change the circumstances of my life, if this or that were different, I'd be happier, more fulfilled. And if you're a Christian, you can put a religious spin on that. And you start thinking, what's God's will for my life? Because it surely can't be this: where nothing seems to be working, or I'm working a mundane job, or doing studies, or being stuck in this marriage. What am I supposed to do with my life? And at least if you're young, our current culture would answer, if you believe in yourself, you can do what ever you want to do, you can be whatever you want to be.

Wishing Your Life Was Different
Look at v17, 'Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him.'

And Paul has just been writing about a Christian husband or wife, married to a non-Christian, whose marriage is hard. And the Christian is thinking life would be better, I'd be happier, I could serve God better, I'd be more fulfilled, if I ended this marriage.

Now, that may not be your situation, but have you ever looked at your job, or your role as a mum or a dad, or as a student at your studies, or at your problems, and you think. 'What's the point of this? What I'm doing is of no value. I feel trapped. I wish I could get out, and do something useful with my life. If only my situation were different I could serve God better.'

'If only…'. Have you ever found yourself thinking that? If only this or that about my life were different. If only I could change the circumstances of my life, my marriage, my job. If only I could earn more, or find a partner, or have more free time to do what I want to do, then things would be better and I could serve God better. And there can be this restlessness on the inside. A discontentedness.

And our consumerist culture plays on that discontent, doesn't it. Marketing tells you that you lack this thing. Society says, you're missing out on this relationship, or this career change, and if you just had *this* you'd be better off. As I was preparing this, I received an email offering me a special deal on chinos. Life-changing chinos, in fact. Now, I am sure they're very good chinos, but life-changing might be going a bit too far. But what's the message? Your life is deficient and if you had these it would be better.

And in this passage Paul uses two examples, circumcision and slavery, which we're going to look at in more detail later. But in both, the temptation was to think, if I had what they had, or didn't have what I have, I'd better off.

And Paul is saying, 'no, it's not your circumstances that need to change, it's your attitude.' The path to finding deep fulfilment in life, and serving God with your life, does not run through changes in your marriage, or job, or physical appearance. It runs through understanding that God has placed you where you are.Verse 17 again, 'Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him.'

Now, imagine you were one of your country's top diplomats, or a highly trained secret agent. And you're called into the office of the Prime Minister or the President, and he tells you, 'I have a special assignment for you. I've hand picked you for this job.' You'd take notice, wouldn't you? And Paul is saying, God has chosen you for where you are right now. You're there because God has placed you there.

Now, young people are told, 'if you believe in yourself, you can be whatever you want to be' it's simply untrue, isn't it. The school I went to was very good at rugby, and believe it or not, I played for the first team. And so when I went to university, I was invited to the college bar to meet the rugby team and see if I wanted to start getting involved. And I walked into the bar, took one look around and realised that my playing days were over, because they were all massive. They had clearly continued to grow and I was still a weed. And I took one look and thought, right, where's the chess club?

You see, we're not all fitted for any role in life we want, are we? If I had carried on playing rugby I would have spent more time in the hospital than on the pitch. By reason of our God-given physical, or psychological, or intellectual make-up, you can't be whatever you want to be, however much you believe in yourself, because that's not how God has made you.

Instead, Paul says, look where God has already placed you, look at the network of relationships around you, and the role he's already assigned for you. And serve him there. Because it's not our circumstances that need to change for us to live fulfilled lives, it's our inner attitudes. It's not that you need to find your calling, it's that you're already in it.

And Paul writes, v17, 'This is my rule in all the churches' - why slip that in? Because the Corinthians can't invent their own, upwardly mobile, your social status matters, some roles are more blessed by God than others, version of Christianity. But it also tells us, this wasn't just a problem for Corinth. Thinking you've got to change your circumstances to be fulfilled and know God's blessing and serve him, is a universal problem.

Bloom Where You're Planted

Proverbs 19:4 says, 'Wealth brings many new friends, but a poor man is deserted by his friend.' So, the person for whom everything is going well, who's raking it in, has lots of friends, but when his money runs out, and his success falters, his friends disappear. But that's not what God's friendship is like. His friendship, your relationship with him, his love for you, does not depend on your social circumstances, or the position you find yourself in in life. And Paul uses these two examples, one

religious, and one social, to tell us, you can know Christ's love, and in response you can serve him, in whatever situation you find yourself.

Look at example number 1: v18-19, 'Was anyone at the time of his call [at the time when God called him to Christ and he was converted] already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God.'

Now, no-one, neither Jew nor gentile, thought that circumcision was nothing. To Jewish people it was everything! It was the sign of the covenant! But to gentiles it also wasn't nothing. Because it was the sign that you were Jewish, a member of a looked down upon, second class ethnic group. And Paul can talk of people reversing the physical marks of circumcision, because some Jews, who wanted to get ahead in society, did just that, because things like sports and athletics, and the public baths where you might meet your clients, were all done naked. So if you really wanted to get ahead in life, and wanted to remove the social reproach of it all, well, you might just have to go under the knife.

But Paul is saying, your ethnic background, whether you're originally Jewish or not, has no impact on your relationship with God and your ability to serve him right where you are. What matters, Paul says, v19, is 'keeping the commandments of God.'

Now, given that being circumcised was a command in the Old Testament, Paul is clearly not talking about obeying the Old Testament law. He's talking about God being the one you're living for, of living for his pleasure and glory, wherever he's put you.

Listen to what he says in Galatians 5:6, 'For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.' And then Galatians 6:15, 'For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.' In other words, when God called you to Christ, and gave you faith to believe in him, it didn't matter to him whether you were Jew or Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, and it doesn't matter to him now. What matters is that now you are a new creation, part of God making everything new. What matters is his transforming work in your heart, changing your attitudes and desires. And now in response to Christ's love for you, you love him. And Jesus said, if you love me, you will obey my commands. And so living a fulfilled life, a life that pleases God, where you know his smile upon you, has nothing to do with circumcision or uncircumcision, with your race or colour or ethnic origin. It's not about your circumstances changing, or even, here, your bodily appearance changing. It's not about being single, married, or single again. It's about inner change. It's about knowing Christ's love for you, and in response loving God and living a life that pleases him in return.

So Paul says, v20, 'Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called.' Bloom where you're planted. Know his love, and love him and love others right where you are

Okay, sure, but what if you don't like where you are?

Example number 2: slavery: v21, 'Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.)'

Now, most slaves had no choice but to stay as they were, they couldn't just decide they wanted a change. So instead of just saying, 'stay as you are' which would be kind of meaningless, he says, don't let being a slave trouble you.

Now, Roman slavery was not like the North American slave trade. In the Roman world slaves were often better educated than their masters. Some were treated appallingly, but others were doctors, teachers, managers, accountants. And somewhere between 30 and 70% of a town's population were slaves. And being a slave could give you financial and social security in a world that could be highly insecure.

But a slave was still a slave. And they could never enjoy the same freedoms as their masters. And if they had children, their children belonged to their master, not them. And if their masters were bad they could face physical or even sexual abuse. So you can understand why being a slave might bother you. It would be easy to think of yourself as a second class citizen, not just in the eyes of men, but in the eyes of God. And if you were a newly converted Christian slave, you could imagine beginning to think, 'I can't serve God to my full potential here.'

Now, you don't have to be a slave to recognise something similar in your own heart. That desire to improve your situation, to be upwardly mobile. To obtain greater financial freedom. To be the boss rather than having to always answer to your boss.

And yet Paul says, v21, 'Do not be concerned about it'. Don't let your social status, or your earning power, or your freedom, be what shapes your life. Because it's not those things that determine your dignity or worth or usefulness to God or your ability to serve him wholeheartedly. You see, more often than not, it's our fretful, or discontented hearts, of wanting a different life, our sin, not our circumstances, that stop us serving God and finding fulfilment.

But, that doesn't mean the Bible is about rigid social structures and 'you lower class need to learn your place. And God's put you there in your situation and you can't leave it.' God is the God who who humbles the proud, and brings down the mighty, who lifts up the poor and raises a shepherd boy to the throne of his people. Proverbs 17:2 says that 'A servant who deals wisely will rule over a son who acts shamefully.' In other words, such a servant is worthy of honour. And simply by addressing slaves in their own right Paul gives them a dignity and a worth equal to their masters. And that's saying nothing of the fact that in 1 Timothy Paul lists 'enslavers' (1:10)- slave traders - as those condemned. Or that in Revelation 18 slave traders face God's judgment in the fall of Babylon, the kingdom of men.

So Paul's rule that you lead the life God has assigned you is not some inflexible, 'you can never change' set-in-stone rule. It doesn't mean you stay in a situation that's sinful or abusive, or that you should never consider a career change. You can be ambitious for something without it being an idol or because you're driven by fretfulness. Verse 21 again, 'If you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity', Paul says.

Paul's point is not, no change is allowed. It's, you can serve Jesus wherever you are. You don't need to buy your freedom, or change jobs, or join Medair, or become a pastor to do that. And that undercuts the obsession some of us Christians can be guilty of, of constantly wondering, 'what's the will of God for my life?' It's something the Bible is strangely silent about. In fact, when Paul does talk about the will of God for your life he says, 'For this is the will of God, your sanctification' (1

Thess 4:3). It's 'Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.' (1 Thess 5:16-18). So it's not, should I do this job or that job, but am I becoming more like Jesus? Because God is much less bothered about your career, whether you're a slave or not, and much more interested in your character - are you becoming more Christlike, and serving him and loving others where he's put you. It's why Paul tells Timothy, 'Godliness with contentment is great gain.' (1 Tim 6:6).

So, circumcised or uncircumcised, slave or free, married or single, God's called you to himself in all these situations, so you can serve him wholeheartedly in all these situations. Whatever situation you find yourself in, live out your Christian calling there, Paul says. In every task you face, you have but one task, to be faithful.

And that doesn't just change the way you see your present situation, but the way you evaluate any future options. Let's say you're beginning to think about a new job. Do you assess that new opportunity based on your personal fulfillment, or whether you can best serve God there, or by staying where you are. Do you let the fact that it pays much better sway you, or do you let the fact that God is using you right where you are swing it? I once heard Campbell McAlpine, a great bible teacher, say, 'when you're assessing the next move, the extra money on the table has got absolutely nothing to do with it.' And I suspect Paul would agree.

But there is something about money and payment that *should* profoundly influence the way you see your present and future.

Bought with a price

Look at v22-23, 'For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men.'

So, Paul is saying, it doesn't matter whether you're a slave or free, you are both of equal value to Jesus. And it's how he sees you and what he's done for you that defines you, not your social status. Because the ultimate slavery is not to this or that human master, it's to sin. And at the cross, Christ has paid the slave price for us in his blood. For the slave, he's paid the price that buys freedom from the controlling power of sin. And for the freedman he's paid the price that means that now Christ is our owner.

And seeing that, seeing yourself as freed from the slave master power of sin, and now owned by Christ, that he's now your master, not you, and not sin, has the power to radically change the way you see yourself and your circumstances.

Verse 23, to slave and free, 'do not become bondservants of men'. Now if you're already a slave why say that? And if you're not a slave, why say that? Because, you're a slave of men when you're enslaved to their opinion of you. And how you feel about yourself, or your life, or the choices you make in life, are closely tied to what others think of you. You're a slave to men when how you behave is swayed by peer-pressure, or advertising, or politics, or social media. In 2 Peter 2:19, Peter says 'whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved'. Whatever dominates your thinking, your decision making, that's what's got you. And that can be an obvious, controlling, destructive addiction. But it can also be what your parents think of you. Or the fear of missing out. Or cultural

pressures on sexuality. Or the way your friendship group views leisure time. Or what your friend's opinion is on something or anything.

But Paul says, Don't be enslaved to men. Because like any slave master, they will work your and drive you. Jesus has given his life to set you free from that. He's your master now and he is a far better one than any of these other owners.

Verse 24, 'So, brothers [and sisters], in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain in God.' Let the way you see your life, your circumstances, your work, your career, your marriage, your parenting, your singleness, be transformed by knowing God is with you in it, and you can serve him in it fully and wholeheartedly, because you belong to Christ. You've been bought with a price.